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Does Romney understand the Middle East revolution?

By David Ignatius

CAIRO — Like other commentators, I found many echoes of Barack Obama's Middle East policy in Mitt Romney's supposedly tough critique of it at Virginia Military Institute on Monday. I suppose that's reassuring — that Romney generally sees the same set of problems that Obama does and in many cases would take pretty much the same action, though girded in "no apology" rhetoric. And I found many points in the speech that made sense.

The one anomaly in the speech was the way Romney lavished praise on Gen. George C. Marshall at the beginning and end of the speech. Was it an oversight or mistake that Romney — among the most pro-Israel presidential candidates in our history — didn't seem to know that Marshall opposed American recognition of Israel and threatened in May 1948 that he would vote against President Truman if he recognized the Jewish state?

Note to Romney speechwriters: Include caveat line ". . . though I didn't agree with all his policies" in future encomiums to the late five-star general.

Speaking of Marshall, he famously advised his aides: "Don't fight the problem. Decide it!" It's one of the clearest statements of political-military pragmatism I know, and it points up one of Obama's attributes: He doesn't fight the problem. He measures the situation realistically, assays the problem and then (usually) makes a decision. Indeed, the courteous, cerebral and reticent Marshall might have been accused of "leading from behind" in dealing with some of his cantankerous commanders.

What was missing from Romney's speech was an understanding that there is a revolution rolling across the Middle East. He talked about "America's great power to shape history" and what he claimed was Obama's mistake of "leaving our destiny at the mercy of events." What was lacking was any apparent recognition that the Arab uprising has been an assertion of citizen rights against police-state regimes and that America couldn't stop this tidal wave of people power even if it wanted to.

Obama has understood the nature of this revolution from the beginning, and though I wish he had been more clear and forceful at various points in articulating America's interests and values, I'd say he has gotten the big things right. He remembers the limits of American power and the need to let Arabs know they are writing this chapter of their history for themselves.

Now, for some specifics:

First, on Iraq, Romney is correct that "gains made by our troops are being eroded." That failing can be partly laid at the feet of Vice President Biden, who has been chiefly responsible for Iraq policy in this administration. Biden oversaw the process that inexplicably allowed incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to hold onto his job after he lost the May 2010 elections to a coalition headed by a pro-American candidate, Ayad Allawi.

This U.S. policy of acquiescence to Maliki has been baffling, from beginning to end, for it was clear to many observers that the Iran-leaning Maliki would eventually demand the exit of all American troops, as Tehran was insisting. But in backing Maliki, the Obama administration was following the equally inexplicable policy of George W. Bush and Gen. David H. Petraeus, who helped put Maliki in power in the first place. Everyone gets bad marks on Iraq. Romney should be careful where he fires his darts.

On Libya, I thought Romney was right when he said the attack that killed Ambassador Christopher Stephens was "not an isolated incident" and was part of an effort by extremists to stir trouble in nearly a dozen different countries. What was missing from Romney's analysis was, again, an understanding that this is a fluid post-revolutionary situation: Salafist demonstrators in the streets are opportunistically using anger over a U.S. video to challenge the more moderate Islamist regimes in power in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and elsewhere. The kind of bombastic American reaction Romney seemed to be advocating would only make matters worse.

On the details of U.S. policy toward Libya and Egypt, as has been noted, Romney's policies were pretty similar to Obama's: more trade, economic assistance, stress on rule of law. There was a big Romney windup on the Arab Spring but not much of a pitch.

The same policy affinity between Romney and Obama was evident, surprisingly, on what has been the high-voltage issue of Iran. For all his denunciation of Obama for "throwing Israel under a bus," it turns out that Romney's red line on Iran — he "will prevent them from acquiring nuclear weapons capability" — is very similar to the one Obama announced last May. The difference is that Romney speaks of preventing "capability," where Obama focuses on the bomb itself, which could be an earlier trigger for military action.

There was more similarity than difference on Afghanistan, too. Romney's Plan B was "a real and successful transition to Afghan security forces by the end of 2014...." Uh, excuse me, but isn't that Plan A — i.e., current U.S. policy.

I did hear a subtle difference on Syria policy, which sounded like an amped-up version of Obama's limited non-lethal covert action to support the Free Syrian Army. Romney said: "In Syria I'll work with our partners to identify and organize those members of the opposition who share our values and then ensure they obtain the arms they need to defeat Assad's tanks helicopters and fighter jets." Based on what I sawlast week in Syria, that's an approach worth examining.

The biggest difference between these candidates on the Middle East, when you boil down all the other rhetoric, is probably on Israel. Romney said it pretty clearly: "The world must never see any daylight between our two nations." Taken at face value, that seems to mean the United States shouldn't take public positions that are different from Israel's. That's a formulation that few Republican foreign policy leaders would agree with. Among those GOP luminaries who very deliberately opened "daylight" were Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Brent Scowcroft, James Baker and Condoleezza Rice.

Romney can't seriously mean that on all major issues affecting Israel, he will defer to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu? No nation hands over policy choices to another, even to its best friend.

Finally, in the utterly outrageous category was Romney's shameless pitch for defense spending, even as he talks about cutting the budget. "I'll roll back President Obama's deep and arbitrary cuts to our national defense that would devastate our military," Romney said. Now, that's pure demagogy: One of Obama's more thoughtful efforts was the defense budget guidance announced last January in which all the service chiefs agreed to balanced reductions in forces — including agreement by the Army and Marine Corps to significant cuts in ground forces on the understanding that we won't be fighting more wars like Iraq and Afghanistan in the near future. Romney should credit that kind of careful, consensus planning rather than trashing it.

Romney's Middle East speech was a serious discussion of big problems. And he's certainly right that there's a dangerous sense of drift in the region, as the "fog of revolution" obscures where these momentous events are heading. But the notion that this is somehow America's fault, and can remedied by a restoration of the old, hard-line policies, is wrong and potentially dangerous for U.S. interests.